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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by the Federation of Cuban Women, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

The Federation of Cuban Women, a non-governmental organization (NGO) in special consultative status since 1997 with over 4 million members, wishes to make the following statement on the empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges.

The world is faced with social inequality, growing class differences, increasingly powerful multinationals, wars, militarization, exploitation of human beings and of nature and a trend towards authoritarianism.

Cuban women, who live in this tumultuous world, are witnesses to the fact that patriarchal, predatory capitalism has dragged the world into a deep, multifaceted crisis. Natural and energy resources have been plundered, especially in the South, climate collapse is imminent, and the food crisis will have devastating consequences, including hunger, poverty and migration.

In the third world, resources have been plundered, populations have been harassed, and leaders have been forcibly changed by imperial fiat, as national sovereignty has been trampled underfoot with absolute impunity. Men and women around the world hope that the recent reform process in the United Nations will prove to be an effective mechanism for protecting them against these great calamities.

The situation in Cuba is different, although the country's economy has also been hit by the multifaceted crisis, in addition to the cruel and genocidal blockade which has been condemned 20 times, by an overwhelming majority of the General Assembly. In spite of this, the United States of America has not changed its policies.

Human well-being can only be attained through full and comprehensive development in many different areas. It must be the focus of all programmes and policies. This is the goal, above and beyond any international agreements that might be signed by the country; moreover, it is the basis for all national plans and programmes.

Bearing in mind the basic principle that priority must be given to producing food for the people, in line with Decree-Law No. 259 of 2008, a new form of land distribution and production has been launched. This entails granting usufruct in order to strengthen productivity and promote employment for women and men. More than 12,000 women have been granted possession of land, along with full access to credit, technical assistance and other opportunities. This enables women to manage and have greater control over land and resources and to apply sound environmental principles.

A total of 223,592 women are currently working in agriculture. Of these, 108,104 work in agricultural enterprises, 106,209 on production units, and 2,063 in the agricultural sciences; of the latter, 253 are scientists.

In the sugar sector, 22 per cent of the workforce are women, and 590, or 9 per cent, hold management positions. Of these, five are directors in the central agency, 70 are directors in functional positions, 44 are vice-directors, and 41 are company directors; of the latter, nine are directors of agro-industrial complexes, and one is director of an entrepreneurial group.

The number of women serving as leaders of the National Association of Small Farmers has tripled to a total of 307, representing 33 per cent of the professional staff at all levels. Of these, 88 are presidents of credit and service cooperatives, 51 work in agricultural production, 21 are municipal chairpersons of the Association, 212 are members of the secretariats, 22 are in the provincial secretariats, and three in the national bureau.

The needs of rural women, like those of the rest of the population, are fully met. The fundamental right to life is assured by the Government from the moment human life begins. In the mountainous areas (nine provinces are in the mountains), a special programme is under way to improve the quality of life, especially for women, with priority being given to basic services in health, education and food. There is also a cultural programme which provides for the construction of video and television rooms, as well as the supply of television sets, video equipment and computers in every school. This helps raise awareness among the population in the areas of environmental conservation, risk reduction and mitigation of the inevitable effects of climate change. At present, 1,800 television and video rooms are available in rural areas where the people can spend leisure time and receive training in subjects such as economics and gender issues. Many of these facilities operate with solar cells and provide jobs for women.

In spite of the serious drought that has hit the country, more than 2,000 water-supply systems have been installed to supply rural areas with chlorinated drinking water. The use of ceramic filters to improve water quality was increased. This has benefited more than 3,000 rural communities, providing them services that are comparable in quality with those of the urban areas.

The State has made a special effort to guarantee the supply of electric power, which is currently provided to nearly 99 per cent of all housing units. In addition to the national power-generation network, different sources of energy are used. Hydroelectric plants supply approximately 10,000 households, and diesel plants supply some 30,000 dwellings in remote areas. Sugar-production plants produce electricity for over 30,000 housing units in *bateyes* (sugar workers' towns).

In non-agricultural sectors, rural women work in different departments of the Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment, as well as in warehouses, beauty parlours, schools, post offices, worker lunchrooms, doctors' offices and hospitals, and in sewage systems, where thousands of women operate new technologies.

To meet the country's needs in the area of reforestation, and in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Federation of Cuban Women, a campaign called "50 árboles más ..." (50 more trees) was launched with the participation of women. The campaign has enlisted the support of families in planting fruit trees and trees for timber. Different communities have planted more than 135 forests, developed 1,348 nurseries and carried out other initiatives, such as collecting seeds and encouraging people to plant their own gardens.

The Federation of Cuban Women interacts with a number of agencies and organizations in order to promote and develop policies on behalf of women:

- Since 1992, the Red Cubana de Organismos e Instituciones de Apoyo a la Mujer Rural (Cuban network of agencies and institutions working on behalf of rural women), a regional initiative of the Food and Agriculture Organization of

the United Nations has monitored policies and compliance with regulations and other measures designed to improve the status of women. The network has also been actively involved in the organization of yearly events held in celebration of Rural Women's Day and World Food Day.

- The Federation of Cuban Women and the National Association of Small Farmers carry out joint actions to provide services for rural families, providing assistance for older persons by helping them strengthen their personal relationships, facilitating recreational opportunities and promoting recognition of their contribution to society. In celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Federation of Cuban Women, these organizations promoted a nationwide campaign called "23 por el 23" (23 for the 23rd), with the goal of encouraging at least 23 women to join each of the more than 3,500 cooperatives in the country.

- A book was published with the testimonies of 50 women rural leaders.

- The gender strategy implemented by the National Association of Small Farmers provides for the creation of the National Commission on Gender, as well as gender commissions at all levels of leadership. It also provides for the establishment of a gender programme to provide training on the subject for leaders of the organization.

- The Cuban Livestock Producers Association, which is headed by a woman and has about 20,000 members, is applying a gender strategy at all levels of the organization. The Association awards a prize to rural women who work in the scientific, technical and practical areas of agri-food production.

The Federation of Cuban Women supports rural women, who have a high profile in Cuba, unlike the situation in other parts of the world. This is made possible by political will of the State and the Government, and the social goals we pursue.

For the well-being of all rural women in Latin America and the world, Cuban women call for the construction, from the grass roots up, of a new international economic and social order that is just and equitable, in which the contributions of women in the development of present and future generations are duly recognized.